

## a sea-change into something rich and strange by kingmaker

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**Summary:**

*Nothing is going to be the way that it was, Jughead had echoed the same words he had spoken to her five years ago. We can't change the past.*

Or, a party is on the agenda, a kid went missing, presumed dead, and some things were left unsaid between Jughead and Betty.  
Stranger Things AU.

## **a sea-change into something rich and strange**

“A party?” Veronica asked as bright-eyed and eager as Betty was hesitant and concerned when she chased her friend’s question with one of her own:

“On a *Tuesday*?”

To her left, Cheryl snorted, but Betty ignored her in favour of staring down Reggie Mantle, whose guileless gaze was flickering between Veronica and her.

“Come on,” Kevin nudged Betty, gently, “it wouldn’t be that bad.”

She opened her mouth to disagree, but Veronica had already pivoted around, and directing her brightest, most entreating smile at her best friend, implored: “Please?”

Betty shut her mouth with a click and pressed her lips together into a flat line; a mannerism eerily reminiscent of her mother. Then, she nodded hesitantly. Veronica and Kevin had braved Alice Cooper for her many a time — Betty could handle an impromptu party for them.

“Fabulous,” Veronica grinned, clapping her hands, and Betty offered her a strained smile. Lately, Veronica spent more time at Betty’s than she had at her own home. Something untoward was brewing between her parents and she needed a distraction of a party now more than ever. A development that had not been lost on Betty.

Veronica spun on her heel to face Cheryl. “What’s the theme?”

“Oh, *I’m* sorry,” Cheryl said, raising an eyebrow and not sounding sorry at all, “was I supposed to provide a theme, too? Is a location, drink, and sustenance not enough for you, Princess?” And just like that, Veronica and Cheryl settled into another one of their passive-aggressive quarrels.

Kevin rolled his eyes and bumped Betty’s shoulder playfully, mouthing *Two weeks, tops* with an exaggerated wiggle of the eyebrows. She just shrugged and cast her eyes on the floor, studying

her feet as she scuffed the school linoleum with a side of her shoe and refusing to comment otherwise.

The six of them — Betty, Veronica, Kevin, Cheryl, Reggie, and Chuck — were waiting for Moose, who was at the nurse's office getting his sprained ankle re-bandaged, and Jason, whom Miss Grundy asked to stay behind to discuss his upcoming flute solo.

Betty was friends with neither of the boys, but Veronica was still amicable with Reggie, even if they were not dating any longer, and some incomprehensible arrangement of staunchest-comrades-slash-bitter-frenemies with Cheryl Blossom. Plus, Kevin and Moose were shaping up to be a *something* soon enough, even if neither was keen on defining the something in question.

So here Betty was, fifth-wheeling the conversation (because no way on God's green earth would she willingly engage in a one-to-one conversation with Chuck Clayton. Ever.) and looking to be soon fifth-wheeling a pool-party.

Hopefully, Betty thought, rather sourly, Chuck would have the presence of mind to bring Nancy.

He was a swine and an asshole, but not utterly incurable; and Nancy Woods miraculously reigned him in by being a human equivalent of 'the big stick'. Sometimes, the implications their relationship transmitted with anyone with a working pair of eyeballs and half a brain made Betty shudder. Better not to think about that lest she wanted a hefty dose of brain-bleach.

"Ugh — *look*," said Cheryl, wrenching Betty out of her thoughts and pulling her gaze towards the redhead's pinched expression. Somehow, she managed to pack twice the usual amount of disdain into her tone. Betty did not think it was possible, but that was Cheryl Blossom in a nutshell — exceeding expectations in the most dramatic of ways.

"Jesus, that's depressing," snorted Reggie, a frown pulling at his face.

Betty turned around, curious about what they were looking at. She knew the exact moment when Kevin's eyes had found the target

because she heard his sharp intake of breath and the half-muttered “Oh, *no*,” as his posture shifted against her back. It was his response that clued her in more than anything else.

There, not far from the main entrance, Jughead Jones stood by the bulletin board, studiously pinning a blue Missing Person flyer, as perversely dogged in his grief as he was in everything else. The sight made Betty’s heart clench in sympathy.

Jughead and her were academic rivals, of a sort. She knew he took her assiduous attempts to best him in their classes as a personal affront to his person, but they had been the best of friends, once.

Without turning around, Betty asked, “Did your dad mention any progress, Kev?”

“Not really,” her friend shrugged. “But the Sheriff put him on a different case. Everything Dad knows is peripheral.”

Chuck smirked. “How much do you want to bet he killed her?”

“Shut *up*, Clayton,” hissed Cheryl, slapping his shoulder. Had it been bared, the talons she called fingernails would have no doubt drawn blood. She grimaced. “Sweet sugar maple, you’re a dick.”

“Yeah, man. Not cool,” Reggie shook his head.

“Since then are you so high-and-mighty?” Chuck shot back, peevishly rubbing his bicep.

“Hey, I might give the guy some flack—”

Veronica arched a brow. “*Some?*”

“Fine — *a lot* of flack,” amended Reggie, staring at his ex-girlfriend with an expression that clearly conveyed *You happy now?*, but Veronica just shrugged, persisting in further addling his mind with that enigmatic smirk of hers he could never read. “But no-one thinks that, you know, Charlie McGee over there *killed* his *sister*.”

“I would.”

Simultaneously, their heads snapped to gawk at an unsettlingly nonchalant Cheryl. She was casually leaning against a wall, examining her immaculate manicure.

“What?” she asked, nonplussed. “Statistically speaking, in domestic cases, a member of the family is more likely to be responsible than a stranger. And we all know that the only functioning human being in that family was the kid.”

“Is, Cher — *is* the kid.” Kevin released a frustrated sigh. His hand was already halfway up towards his hair before he remembered himself and let it fall limply to his side. “Jesus, guys, J.B. isn’t dead. She’s only missing. Besides, Jughead’s functional—”

“He’s a *weirdo*,” Reggie shot in, much too loudly, and yelped when Veronica pinched his forearm, hissing at him to be quiet.

This, more than anything else, drew in stray stares from the surrounding student body.

“Fine,” Kevin relented. Reggie was being an ass about it, but he had a point. “He *is*, but personality flaws aside, Jug’s a decent guy. And besides, his *little sister* is *missing*. It’s an actual *tragedy*, not fuel for what you will no doubt assume to be very clever taunts, but in reality will barely scrape up to be mediocre — yes, I’m looking at you, Charles Clayton.”

“Hey! I was just kiddin’ before!”

Kevin narrowed his eyes. “You have a look of a man who would gladly kick a guy when he’s down. Forgive me if I’m being skeptical. Back me up here, Betty. We should—Wait. Where’s Betty?” He spun around, gaze searching for a familiar blonde ponytail. “*Betty?*”

“There she is.”

Four pairs of eyes followed the direction in which Cheryl’s red-tipped finger was pointing in.

Betty was not sure what she hoped to accomplish by approaching Jughead, but, she reasoned, had it been her in his shoes she would have wanted *someone*, anyone really, to try and comfort her. So, here she was. Trying to comfort.

Except, Betty has not been the first to whom this notion had occurred.

There, below the swim team's aqua-coloured tryouts notice, Trula Twyst stood much too close to Jughead Jones, her beringed fingers resting on his shoulder, her straight back to a corridor full of a flowing stream of conspicuously eyeballing teenagers. They were talking, and from what little Betty could see and determine from Jughead's hunched posture and pinched expression, from either anger or frustration, not about the most pleasant of topics.

"Hey," Betty softly mouthed to him and gave a little, self-conscious wave. Jughead just sluggishly blinked at her in acknowledgement over Trula's freckled shoulder before casting his eyes downward.

If Betty was being honest, Jughead and her had not been friends in a long while. Long before Veronica moved into town, even before The Archie Incident had transpired. And a guilty part of Betty's heart hissed that they might as well be strangers now for she knew next to nothing about him these days.

"—call you later on, all right," she overheard Trula saying in a hushed tone. "You'll figure something out, Jug. You always do."

Jughead gave a jerky nod, refusing to look at Trula's face, and with a sigh the redhead stepped away from him and gingerly pried away half-a-stack of printouts out his grip. Trula cast a sideways glance at Betty out of the corner of one eye, but did not comment on her presence otherwise. She picked up her backpack from where it had been propped up against the wall and with a parting pat on Jughead's bicep, walked away.

Betty and he both waited, inexplicably, for the school doors to shut close behind Trula Twyst's short figure before either of them chose to look at the other.

"So," Betty began, uncertainly.

"So," he echoed. "How's it going, Bets?"

"It's good, actually," Betty answered instinctively. But then, her brows knitted in a frown, as she was taken aback by the casual nature of the question. "But...I'm not here to talk about me. I just...I wanted to say, umm, I'm sorry—" *about everything*, "—about your sister."

"Yeah," he laughed, hollowly, "I figured you're here about that. Well, you paid your dues, Coop. Now, run along," he said with a dismissive wave of a hand.

"No," Betty insisted, grabbing onto his other wrist and squeezing, gently. When she spoke next, her voice was firm and full of meaning. "I'm *sorry* about your *sister*."

Jughead's jaw clenched, his whole demeanour changing, straightening, and stilling with tension and something else, a quiet intensity of sorts, but he stayed silent, waiting. Holding her insistent gaze with his own.

She wondered what he was seeing there. If he was seeing her as she was or as she wanted to be? But as quickly as the thought came, it vanished, winking out of existence like the fitful flickering of a dying candle.

As swiftly as if she had been burned, Betty let go of his wrist.

The moment hung between them like a hangman's noose for a heartbeat. Then, Betty licked her lips and persevered. "This whole situation just sucks."

"Right," Jughead gave her a wan, thin-lipped smile, "sucks."

In her head, Betty could almost hear the sarcastic remark brewing on the tip of his tongue: *'Sucks' is a perfect descriptor of the situation my family found itself. Your eloquence is spot on, Coop.*

She tried a different tactic. "Everyone's thinking about you."

Jughead's gaze flickered away from her face and he glanced at her friends over Betty's golden head. "Sure they are," he snorted, softly.

He has a point, Betty thought. Still. It would not do to concede it.

"*I am*," she insisted, unwittingly stepping closer.

"That," Jughead assured her, not unkindly, "I do believe."

Conscious of their proximity and the five sets of eyes boring into her back, Betty's stare shifted from his face onto the grainy, black-and-white picture of J.B. beneath the bold, black question: HAVE YOU SEEN ME?

For a briefest of moments, she thought about Archie, and promptly shoved the memory out of her mind. It would do no good anyone at all to dwell on ghosts.

"She's a smart girl," Betty found herself saying as the tip of her finger traced the upward curve of J.B.'s smile, "she'll be all right."

Paradoxically, despite what her mother said about likelihood of finding a child unharmed in a forest that immense and in such proximity to a turbulent Sweetwater River, Betty did believe her words. J.B. was shrewd; she different from clever Polly, smart Ethel, and cunning Toni in some fundamental way that was all too similar to her older brother. J.B. was every bit as astute and sharp-witted as Jughead, if not nearly as hardheaded, thankfully.

"It's my fault."

It took Betty a moment to realise he had spoken. "What?"

But Jughead paid her no mind. He was directing a thousand-yard stare at the bulletin board, his fingers absently tugging at a cuff of his pale-blue sherpa jacket.

"I took an extra shift at work," he explained, tone simultaneously far away and disconcertingly matter-of-fact. "Came in late. Didn't realise she was gone until the morning. Had I been home, I would have



noticed sooner. Perhaps, she would not have disappeared at all.”

The most polarising attributes of Jughead Jones’s character, Betty remembered, only with partial fondness, were his pertinacious assurance of his own capabilities and his adamant insistence on doing things his own way.

*It should not be this hard for him, she reasoned, to yield. Just this once.*

He would not though, she knew with certitude. Just as he would not let go of his perceived guilt. Just as he would not give up on his sister, no matter what.

Jughead said it was his fault. And what did one say to a statement like that?

“I,” she began, haltingly. *I cannot imagine what I would do had it been Polly who vanished in J.B.’s stead. I cannot imagine what you are going through. Whatever I think, does not even hold a candle to what you are feeling.*

“I’m here for you, Jug,” Betty finally said, grasping his hand again and squeezing his fingers tightly between the fragile bones of her own, “whatever you need.”

*Let the past die, she wanted to say, but had not found the courage to. Put our ghosts to rest.*

*Let me be your friend again.*

“I see you spoke with Creepshow,” Chuck said when Betty approached him and her friends. “I did not know Jones possessed a

capacity for more than monosyllabic answers to anyone below the age of thirty-five.”

Betty shrugged noncommittally, but did not speak otherwise. She turned her profile towards Kevin and away from Chuck, wishing not to interact with him at all.

(She ignored Chuck’s lowly muttered, “Bitch.”)

The bell had keeled but a half-a-minute prior, and Jughead had taken the opportunity to slip away from her with a mumbled *Got a Physics test. Need jet, Coop.*

He had not spared her a second look.

“Fine!” Veronica exclaimed, clearly a follow-up of whatever conversation (read: argument) she was having prior. “Reginald, you win. Happy?”

“Ecstatic, darling,” he chimed, putting a hand on Veronica’s hip and smoothly tucking her into his side.

Veronica pushed Reggie away with what should have been effective glare, had she not been smiling a little, too.

Kevin coughed discreetly into his fist, nudging Betty’s side a little with his elbow, but it was Chery’s sharp tone that jounced Betty out of her haze of thoughts.

“Ugh, you two are disgusting. Jay-Jay, let’s go,” her command cracked through the air, reminiscent of a whip lashing bare skin. Face twisted in a grimace of displeasure, Cheryl swivelled on a heel, and purposefully and snappingly strode away on charged murder-weapons on the lam from the law and thus posing as women’s footwear.

Jason, the eerily silent twin-brother with the same exceedingly red hair, followed closely behind, appearing too much like an inverse of what a strawberry covered in whipped cream should look like in his pristinely white clothes and shoes.

Veronica watched the pair until they were out of sight. She pursed

her lips and turned sideways to peer up at Kevin. “You *had* to do provoke her, didn’t you?”

“Hey,” the boy’s positively shit-eating grin carried no apology whatsoever, “you *asked* me to.”

“I have, haven’t I,” she sighed and instinctively touched the string of perfectly matched pearls looped around her neck.

“All right,” she barked, cheerily, clapping her hands together and pivoted on her heel to blind Reggie with a smile far brighter than the situation warranted. “You’re in charge of liquor, Reggaeton—”

“Yeah, I am!”

“Remember,” Veronica interrupted, pointedly stabbing his left pectoral with an index finger. “*No* tequila.”

“Yeah, Princess,” agreed Reggie, softer this time, “I know.”

“Ugh,” groaned Betty as her forehead connected with Kevin’s bicep, issuing a soft laugh from the boy as he patted her ponytail fondly, “Mother Mary and Joseph, what did I get myself into?”

(“A right pickle,” quipped Kevin as he draped an arm around her shoulders, but it fell on deaf ears.)

*Nothing is going to be the way that it was*, Jughead had echoed the same words he had spoken to her five years ago. *We can’t change the past.*

She stole a glance at the school entrance, but Jughead was long gone.

Betty could almost imagine him there again.

*I am not certain we can forget it, either, Coop.*

### **Author's Note:**

\*hits head against the table\* fuck am I doing? what was even that ending?  
anyway, hit me up on my tumblr: [strix](#).